Living Outside and Inside the Future

I. The Future Has Already Arrived — Somewhere Else

The future no longer
announces itself slowly.
It appears fully formed, in
specific places, with a
confidence that feels almost
impolite.

Shenzhen.

NEOM.

Not as dreams, but as facts.
They do not ask whether they should exist. They simply do.
Concrete poured at scale, systems wired in advance, logistics planned decades ahead. These are not utopias; they are instruments. Their power lies not in imagination but in execution.
From the outside, they look like the future made visible.
From the West, they look strangely unreal.
Not because they are

impossible — but because they operate according to assumptions we no longer fully share.
And this is where the unease begins.

II. The Western Condition: Knowing Without Moving

The West does not lack intelligence.
It does not lack technology.
It does not lack awareness.
It lacks directional

commitment.
Western societies have become exceptionally good at analysis, critique, and moral calibration. They understand the risks of technology, the dangers of power, the fragility of systems. Entire intellectual industries exist to explain what could go wrong.
But knowing is not the same as acting.
Where other regions have decided — sometimes

brutally — what they are willing to sacrifice in order to move forward, the West hesitates. Not because it is weak, but because it has internalized the cost of past catastrophes too well.

After the twentieth century, Europe learned restraint. It learned skepticism. It learned to slow down history.

That lesson worked — for a while.

But now the world has entered another acceleration

phase, and restraint has begun to look like paralysis.
So when Western observers look at Shenzhen or NEOM, the feeling is not envy.
It is dissonance.

III. Futures That Don’t Ask Permission

Shenzhen is not impressive because it is modern. It is impressive because it does not doubt itself.
It operates on a simple logic:

build → test → discard → rebuild.
There is no nostalgia embedded in its streets. No reverence for what came before. No obligation to preserve psychological continuity.

NEOM takes this logic further. It attempts to design the future as a total system: movement, energy, labor, leisure, data, climate — all optimized, all pre-planned.

These places are not cities in the traditional sense. They are propositions.
They ask:
What if we stop asking whether something feels right — and simply ask whether it works?
And that question alone creates a fault line.

IV. The Experience of Being "Off-Track"

For those who grew up in

postwar Western societies, this moment feels disorienting.
Not because life was better before — but because it was slower, softer, more ambiguous.
The 1970s and 80s offered stability without depth. Routine without meaning. Comfort without articulation. For many people, especially those who did not fit clean social categories, this world already felt strange. It was

not hostile — just indifferent. There was no language for complexity, no space for identities that didn't resolve neatly.

So the feeling of being "off-track" didn't begin with the future.

It began long before.

What has changed is that now the world itself is accelerating — and the distance between inner life and external reality has become impossible to ignore.

V. Metacognition in an Age That Rewards Speed

Modern systems reward decisiveness, alignment, velocity.
Metacognition — the ability to observe one’s own

thinking — does the opposite. It slows perception. It introduces doubt. It resists automation.

In a world organized around throughput, that becomes a liability.

Not because reflection is wrong, but because it interrupts flow.

Highly reflective people do not fail because they lack intelligence. They fail because they do not become frictionless.

They notice what is being lost. They hesitate where others execute. They ask what a system does to a person, not just what it produces.
And in an era of acceleration, that kind of awareness feels increasingly out of place.

VI. Why the West Feels Stuck

The West is not declining because it is incapable.
It is stuck because it is

undecided.
It has not resolved whether: –
efficiency matters more than
meaning
– speed outweighs legitimacy
– systems should serve
humans or replace them

China has chosen. The Gulf has chosen. The West is still negotiating with itself.

This hesitation looks like weakness from the outside. From within, it feels like exhaustion.
But it also reflects something rare: a lingering unwillingness to sacrifice the human interior for momentum.
VII. The Real Divide
The real divide is not East versus West.

It is between:
futures that function
and futures that can be
inhabited
Between:
systems that run
and lives that still feel like
lives
Some people sense this
divide instinctively. They feel
displaced not because they
are behind, but because they
refuse to become seamless
components.
They do not reject the future.

They question its shape.
And in doing so, they occupy a position that is increasingly rare: not ahead, not behind — but adjacent.

VIII. Closing: The Value of Standing Slightly Aside

Perhaps the most unsettling realization is this:
The future may not need everyone to participate in it. Some people will build it. Some will optimize it. Some will live inside it.
And some will remain just far enough outside to notice what it does to those within. Not out of resistance. Not out of nostalgia.
But because someone has to remember what it feels like to be human before efficiency

becomes the only measure left.
That position is not glamorous. It does not scale. It does not trend.
But without it, the future becomes very impressive — and very empty.